
Physical Education Experiences at Residential Schools for Students Who Are Blind: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Structured abstract: *Introduction:* Recently, researchers have explored the perspectives of those with disabilities to better understand their experiences in physical education. However, little has been done with focusing on those with visual impairments. Utilizing a qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis framework, the purpose of this study was to examine the meaning that adults with visual impairments who attended residential schools for students who are blind ascribed to their physical education experiences.

Methods: A group of five adult males who attended physical education at residential schools in the United States were purposely selected for this study. Data were collected via semistructured telephone interviews and reflective interview notes. Data were analyzed using a five-step analytical process, and recurring themes were summarized and presented as results.

Results and discussion: Two broadly defined interrelated themes emerged from the participants' narratives. One theme, "being the only blind guy, to being one of the crowd," explained how differences in school settings contributed to the differences experienced by participants when attending residential and public or community schools. Cumulatively, participants described their residential school experiences as more inclusive and explained feelings of "being normal." The second theme, "the bullies and the bullied," explained the lived experiences of participants within the social dynamics of physical education environments and showed perceptions of those who were "able" and "less able." *Implications for practitioners:* Listening to the voices of individuals with disabilities can afford researchers and teachers with a better understanding of how they experience classes and help identify strategies to improve instruction. Two important implications for physical education teachers derived from this study were to ensure that adaptations are made to meet students' needs, and that students are afforded choices within their physical education curriculum. Furthermore, in addition to experiences of bullying in inclusive settings, practitioners must be aware of these instances in residential schools as well.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-IA; 2004) requires that physical education be made available to children with disabilities, and that it include specially designed classes, if necessary, to meet students' unique needs. Properly implemented physical education programs encourage students to be physically active during the school day (Lieberman, Ponchillia, & Ponchillia, 2013), and develop fundamental skills that are necessary to engage in and maintain an active and healthy lifestyle (Schedlin, Lieberman, Houston-Wilson, & Cruz, 2012). These benefits are available to all students who actively participate in class, including those with visual impairments (that is, those with low vision and complete blindness). For students with visual impairments, well-designed physical education programs, with support from teachers of students who are visually impaired and orientation and mobility instructors, can also offer opportunities to learn components of the expanded core curriculum (Lieberman, Haegele, Columna, & Conroy, 2014). While properly conceptualized physical education classes can yield positive benefits, poorly planned classes may contribute to adverse effects such as delays in motor competence concepts (for example, object control and locomotor skills; Haegele, Brian, & Goodway, 2015), low physical activity participation (Haegele & Porretta, 2015), and low levels of health-related fitness (Lieberman, Byrne, Mattern, Watt, & Fernandez-Vivo, 2010).

Research focusing on physical education for students with visual impairments has typically concentrated on the perspectives of stakeholders, such as physical education teachers (Lieberman, Houston-

Wilson, & Kozub, 2002) and parents (Perkins, Columna, Lieberman, & Bailey, 2013; Stuart, Lieberman, & Hand, 2006). Briefly, findings from this line of research suggest that students with visual impairments tend to experience a number of barriers to participation in physical education. These barriers can include a lack of trained physical education teachers and paraeducators who understand the needs of students with visual impairments (Lieberman & Conroy, 2013; Stuart et al., 2006) as well as limited physical activity opportunities both within and outside of schools (Perkins et al., 2013). Fortunately, research has suggested that physical education programs designed to overcome these barriers, tailored for the needs of those with visual impairments, can improve physical activity levels (Cervantes & Porretta, 2013) and increase motor competence (Haegele et al., 2015).

Although research focusing on physical education for individuals with disabilities has typically examined the perspectives of stakeholders, recent research has shifted to value the perspectives of those with disabilities regarding their experiences in physical activity contexts (Byrnes & Rickards, 2011). By acknowledging how individuals with visual impairments perceive the world, more insight can be given into how they experience different aspects of life (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015). For instance, understanding one's thoughts and feelings about physical education can lead to a better understanding of how they experience classes and can help identify strategies to improve instruction (Coates, 2011). This focus is primarily situated within the qualitative research paradigm, as it allows those with disabilities a voice to describe experiences and opinions from their perspectives

(Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Currently, research exploring physical education experiences from the perspectives of students has included those with physical disabilities (Coates & Vickerman, 2008), learning disabilities (Fitzgerald, Jobling, & Kirk, 2003), and autism spectrum disorder (Healy, Msetfi, & Gallagher, 2013). However, little has been done to explore the perspectives of individuals with visual impairments.

In this study, we focus on five adults with visual impairments and their reflections of experiences in physical education at residential schools for students who are blind. In recent years, much attention has focused on inclusive practices in physical education for individuals with visual impairments (Lieberman et al., 2013). However, although residential schools have a rich history of providing well-rounded educational programs for individuals with visual impairments, little is known about physical education practices at these schools from a research perspective (Haegele & Lieberman, 2016). Because of this, exploring the experiences of individuals with visual impairments who attended residential schools provides a unique perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the meaning that adults with visual impairments who attended residential schools ascribed to their physical education experiences.

Conceptual framework

In order to explore the meaning that individuals with visual impairments ascribe to their experiences during physical education at residential schools, a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis framework was utilized for this study.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis allows researchers to explore how participants make sense of the world from their own perspective and lived experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). This approach explains that individuals, acting as “self-interpreting beings,” engage in interpreting the events, objects, and other people in their lives and community. Utilizing this framework, researchers attempt to make sense of the meaning participants ascribe to these embodied experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This approach focuses on the complex understanding of experiences as lived processes that are unique to each person’s embodied and situated relationship to the world (Smith et al., 2013). *Embodiment* and *intentionality*, central tenets of phenomenological work, are of primary interest in the current study. *Embodiment* suggests that a person’s experiences of the world and self are bound with their experience with their body (Ainley, 1989). Because bodies can be considered to be enabling or disabling, the embodiment perspective can have strong implications and significant effects for individuals with disabilities (Block & Weatherford, 2013), and it has become of interest to researchers in this area (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Particular to interpretative phenomenological analysis, the task of examining how individuals make sense of their embodied experiences is paramount (Smith et al., 2013). *Intentionality* describes the relationship between the process occurring in consciousness and the object of attention during that process. In phenomenological terms, this suggests that whenever there is experience or consciousness, it must be “about” something (Smith et al., 2013). Intentionality provides a relational element regard-

Table 1
Descriptive and demographic information for the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Race or ethnicity ^a	Grade levels at RS	Acuity (ISBA classification)	Additional disability or impairment
Hank	32	African American and Caucasian	11th–12th	Complete blindness (B1)	NA
Doug	49	Caucasian	1st–6th	Complete blindness (B1)	NA
Frank	50	Caucasian, Arcadian, and Cajun	1st–12th	20/400 during elementary school, decreasing to complete blindness in high school (B1–B3)	Fibromyalgia
Matt	42	Caucasian	9th–12th	Complete blindness (B1)	Shortened hamstrings
Edward	34	Caucasian	9th–12th	20/500 (B3)	Right side weakness, brain tumor

RS = residential school; NA = not applicable.

^a Participants were asked to describe how they identified their race or ethnicity.

ISBA classifications include B1 (blind), B2 (travel vision), B3 (legal blindness), and B4 (low vision).

ing one's lived experience because it refers not only to what is experienced, but to the way in which it is experienced (Bredahl, 2013).

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were purposely selected based on prespecified eligibility criteria for this study, according to procedure described by Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012). Specifically, a call for participants was distributed through a registry for individuals with visual impairments who are interested in participating in research. Eligibility criteria included individuals 18 years or older, but less than 51 years of age; who had visual impairments (including blindness) during their K–12 education experience; who would be willing to complete an interview for 60 to 90 minutes; and who would be willing to exchange e-mail correspondence following the interview. The choice of this age range aimed to ensure inclusion of participants in a variety of phases of life—such as the phase in which one establishes

work, career, and family; or the phase in which one has an established life situation, yet has not retired (Bredahl, 2013). Interested potential participants were asked to e-mail the first author and answer several demographic questions. Of the individuals who answered this call for participants, those who attended a residential school for at least two years were invited to participate in this study. The selected participants were purposely small, as per recommendations for interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2013), in order to “provide sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants, but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated” (p. 51). All participants (Doug, Frank, Edward, Hank, and Matt) were adult males with congenital visual impairments who attended residential schools for at least two years. No participants attended the same residential school. Table 1 provides detailed descriptive and demographic information about each participant. Pseudonyms were

assigned to the participants to protect their identities.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected in two ways: semi-structured telephone interviews and reflective interview notes. Semistructured interviews followed an interview guide that was inspired by the research focus and developed to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued across participants (Patton, 2002). A panel of two experts, selected because of their experience in the field of adapted physical education and in conducting qualitative research, was recruited to ensure the content validity of the interview questions. Revisions to the initial interview guide were made based on the recommendations of the panel, and all revisions were reviewed and approved by the panel.

Telephone interviews were completed and audio-recorded by the first author and subsequently transcribed by the fourth author. Because of the vast distances between the participants, telephone interviews were used in lieu of face-to-face interviews. Telephone interviews hold several advantages over face-to-face interviews, such as cost-effectiveness and a reduction of interviewer effects (Goodwin & Staples, 2005; Haegele, Zhu, & Davis, *in press*). However, limitations have been noted, such as diluting the intimacy of the interviews and the interviewer's ability to capture nuances of body language or facial gestures (Goodwin & Staples, 2005). Each interview began with the interviewer describing the purpose of the study, as well as the background of the interviewer in order to disclose researcher positionality. *Positionality* refers to the interviewer's relationship

with the group being studied (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). The interviewer explicitly stated that he was employed as a faculty member at a university health and physical education teaching program, had been directing sport programs for youths with visual impairments, was previously an adapted physical education teacher in schools, and was a Caucasian male who did not have a disability. Each interview took approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Reflective interview notes allow investigators to conceptually return to the interview setting during analysis (An & Goodwin, 2007), can control for interview effects (Fraenkel et al., 2012), and ensure reflexivity (Walker, Read, & Priest, 2013). *Reflexivity* is the process of reflecting critically on oneself and noting personal values that could affect data collection and interpretation (Walker et al., 2013). During and immediately following each interview, reflective interview notes were recorded, and included the interviewer's reflections on what the participant said, initial feelings about the conversation, and preliminary thoughts about possible emerging themes. Data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the lead researcher's institution.

DATA ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

The data analysis selected for this study was directly aligned with and informed by the conceptual framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Therefore, it followed a five-step analytical process. The objective of this process was to elucidate and present results in the form of participant experiences through the lenses of embodiment and intentionality. Step 1 of this process included the first

author reading and rereading each of the interview transcripts and reflective notes. This stage of the analysis allowed the analyst to become intimate with the data, ensured that the participants became the focus of the analysis, and allowed a model of the overall interview to emerge (Smith et al., 2013). While reading and rereading the documents, the first author conducted a free textual analysis (step 2), in which units of data of interest, as well as descriptive and exploratory comments, were recorded (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Because note taking took place during the reading and rereading process, steps 1 and 2 merged. Step 3 included reducing each document and recording comments associated with each participant into emergent themes (Smith et al., 2013). Next, emergent themes were compared within each participant's documents to form clusters of related themes (step 4). At this point, emerging themes that were unrelated to the research focus of this project were discarded. Last, the themes were compared across participants to determine which patterns existed (step 5). Recurring themes were shared with and discussed among the authorship team until complete (100%) agreement was reached on the themes. The agreed-upon themes were summarized and presented as results.

During data collection and analysis, several techniques were utilized to ensure trustworthiness. *Trustworthiness* encompasses the extent to which the phenomena described represent the experiences shared by the participants (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014). Trustworthiness was established using member checking, peer debriefing, and transferability. Member checking is used to reduce the effect of subjective bias (Patton, 2002). Each participant received and re-

viewed their transcript for accuracy and agreement. All participants approved of a final transcript before analysis. Peer debriefing is a process of exposing oneself to knowledgeable peers to explore aspects of analysis that might remain implicit to the primary investigator (Patton, 2002). In addition to input from the authorship team, the first author shared data with and received critical feedback from a researcher with experience in this area of analysis who was not involved in the current study. Transferability, or whether findings can be applied to others in similar contexts or situations, was enhanced in this study by providing abundant detail about participants (An & Goodwin, 2007). The process allows for natural comparisons to other males who attended residential schools.

Results and discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning that adults with visual impairments who attended residential schools ascribed to their physical education experiences. Two broadly defined interrelated themes emerged from the participants' narratives: "Being the only blind guy, to being one of the crowd" and "the bullies and the bullied." Throughout this paper, person-first terminology is utilized within the voice of the authors. However, disability language used within the direct quotes of participants is left uncensored in order to respect each participant's viewpoint toward disability (Peers, Spencer-Cavaliere, & Eales, 2014).

"BEING THE ONLY BLIND GUY, TO BEING ONE OF THE CROWD"

The quote framing this theme was voiced by Hank when discussing his transition

from a public to a residential school. Among the participants, the most commonly discussed topic was their feelings about differences between physical education at public and residential schools. Predominantly, participants said that there were differences in how included they felt during physical education. In public schools, several participants suggested that they felt “left out,” and that they “couldn’t participate in as many games as sighted kids” (Edward). Hank suggested that during his public school experience, he felt “more left out in physical education than in other classes.” These feelings of exclusion are consistent with other research exploring social inclusion in physical education (Place & Hodge, 2001). However, residential schools offered a different experience. For example, Matt explained:

At the public school you realize that there were certain things that you just couldn’t do. But that changed when I hit the residential school. There wasn’t much that you didn’t get to do there. You knew there was something that basically anybody could do because they knew how to adapt it or if their physical limitations kept you from doing something, then they [the teacher] would find another. You would not sit idle during physical education. You would do something.

Matt explained that his body was less disabling when participating in physical education at the residential school. This embodied perspective was echoed by other participants. For example, after

transitioning to a residential school, Hank said:

I felt a lot more included. I felt like I could have a bit of a more normal school experience. So now all of a sudden I am actually, you know, able to participate in the physical education class. It was a lot better feeling because I felt more normal with my experiences.

In terms of intentionality, Hank explained the relational element between participating in physical education activities and feelings of “being normal.” One element that made participants feel included was the availability of adaptations to equipment. For example, Edward explained that “in the public schools [activities were] geared towards sighted kids and in the residential schools they were geared toward people with disabilities.” Regarding track and field activities, Matt added that “you didn’t need anybody to run with you, because [the track] had a rail”. Previous research has demonstrated that students with disabilities tend to experience feelings of being “unable” due to restricted participation associated with activity constraints during physical education (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). Similar to previous research (Haegle & Sutherland, 2015), participants in this study reported that the availability of adaptations decreased their perceptions of inability and expressed a reduced fear of being left out of activities. Hank explained:

Here, I am in an environment where I could actually do more. The things that you wanted to do.

You know, I was able to participate in physical education class and not have to worry about being left out of activities.

Although feelings of exclusion have been documented in research describing the perspectives of students with disabilities in inclusive physical education (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015), this was not the case for these individuals during their residential school experiences.

Two advantages of public school physical education were also voiced by participants when discussing perceived differences between schools. For example, Frank, who exclusively attended a residential school, discussed his longing for physical activity choices in which he could participate during physical education. He said:

What I really disliked is that we really had no choice in our physical education program. You might be outside running or swimming, but you did what the teachers asked. You never had a choice the way I later learned at public high schools. Their students had so many choices I was blown away. You could do a semester of golf, or basketball, or dance. We never got that.

Although Frank explained that he “never felt left out” in physical education, he thought that attending a public school would have provided options for different activities. A second advantage that was discussed was the need to participate in activities with people without visual impairments. Edward explained:

I think public school experience was also good because it gives you a chance to interact with the real world. Because in the real world you are living, like I am, around other sighted people, and public school gives you the opportunity to understand what that world is like and how to interact with people who are not just other blind people. I think that a wide range of experience is a good thing.

According to Edward, it was important for him to engage in activities with people without visual impairments, because future activities outside of school settings would have a similar dynamic. Although participants in this study shared that they felt more included during physical education at residential schools, Hank explained that there may be benefits to experiencing it in both environments.

“THE BULLIES AND THE BULLIED”

Relationships with peers are viewed by students with disabilities as essential to feeling included during physical education activities (Spencer-Cavaliere & Watkinson, 2010). This sentiment was consistent with experiences voiced by participants in this study in regard to physical education participation at residential schools. For Hank, peer relationships were considered “better” at residential schools in comparison to public schools. Because of perceived similarities with his peers, Hank expressed that it was easier for him to engage in social interactions and develop friendships with his peers at the residential school than at public schools. This assertion is in line with previous research exploring friendship-

developing experiences in physical education among those with disabilities (Seymour, Reid, & Bloom, 2009).

Unfortunately, however, other participants did not share Hank's view on relationships with peers, and explained instances of bullying among students. For example, Doug explained that these instances were more common at the residential school than in public school:

I think one of the big things was the teasing all disappeared [when leaving the residential school]. Especially at the school for the blind, I wondered why I was even there because that [bullying] was something I never experienced at home and so it kind of makes you into the sort of person where you realize you better not show your feelings because nobody's going to care.

Previous research suggests that bullying tends to be present in the lives of most individuals with visual impairments and that status within groups can factor into bullying (Dane-Staples, Lieberman, Ratcliff, & Rounds, 2013). For example, Frank explained his status as a strong academic factored into his experiences:

I really wasn't doing as well as I knew I was supposed to do and I knew I would hear about it from my peer group. And I knew [physical education] wasn't going to be fun because some of them [peers] liked to take me down a peg because I was pretty good at the academic side of school and it was a way to kind of pay me back.

In this instance, Frank described experiences of being bullied as it related to his high academic skills outside of physical education. Interestingly, Hank's description of his experience with peers who he described as "less able" provides insight into a different embodied perspective:

I found it easier to make friends with the people I would consider more normal in like they were not slow or anything like that. And I found it a little bit harder as I got used to the school for the blind to sometimes deal with some of the special ed[ucation] kids because they were a little bit slower. I am trying to think about how I felt, but at the time I think I found them a little more annoying.

Hank provides a distinct perspective from others in this study, where he explains his challenges in classes with peers who were "less able," and his feelings about those experiences. His experiences in physical education may have been a key factor in producing negative stereotypes, bias, and perceptions about other individuals with visual impairments who were "less able." Based on our phenomenological analysis, homogeneous behavioral norms were strongly related to students' social experiences in physical education contexts. For example, participants experienced isolation or marginalization from peers that were related to significant gaps between internal factors (academic experiences in social contexts) and external factors (appearances as athletic or nonathletic) within social interactions in physical education. This may have contributed to the instances

of bullying experienced by participants as bullies and the bullied.

Summary and implications

By listening to the voices of individuals with disabilities, we can gain a better understanding of how they experience physical education classes, and this information can help identify strategies to improve instruction (Coates, 2011). The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning that adults with visual impairments who attended residential schools ascribed to their physical education experiences. Two major findings emerged from this study. First, although many described the feeling of being more included during activities in physical education at residential schools (Edward, Matt, Hank, Doug), considerations of choice and participating in activities that reflected society (that is, with individuals without visual impairments) were valued. To the knowledge of the authors, this study was the first in which participants explained differences between their physical education experiences in public and residential schools. Because of the dearth of research pertaining to physical education at residential schools (Haegle & Lieberman, 2016), further studies are warranted to continue to explore current practices at these schools as well as avenues to improve instruction. Second, participants expressed feelings about relationships they developed and engaged in during physical education with peers. Peer interactions among participants varied, and differences may be attributed to experiencing these interactions from different (either enabling or disabling) bodies (Block & Weatherford, 2013) and

the social status of these bodies (Dane-Staples et al., 2013).

There were two primary limitations in this study. First, utilizing telephone interviews limited the authors' ability to capture certain gestural nuances that would have been recorded during face-to-face interviews. Second, because this was a retrospective study and participants' ages ranged from 32 to 50 years, it is possible that the experiences of these participants are not representative of typical experiences at residential schools today.

The results of this study provide a number of practical implications that should be considered by physical education teachers at residential schools. First, participants expressed that the level of willingness of teachers to adapt activities can affect the level of engagement of the students with disabilities in their classes. Second, although participants expressed feelings of being more included in activities at residential schools, the availability of a variety of physical activity options within classes was reported to be absent. Unfortunately, when limited activity choices are available, students may choose to exclude themselves from participation (Fitzgerald & Stride, 2012). Last, results of this study demonstrate that instances of bullying, related to differences in ability among students that are typically reported in public school settings, can also occur in residential schools. To ensure that students maintain interest in and gain important benefits from physical education, teachers should make sure that adaptations to meet students' needs are readily available within activities, that students are afforded choices within their physical education curriculum, and that teachers are aware of

bullying activities occurring in physical education contexts.

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